

What is Heart Failure?

Being diagnosed with heart failure can be scary.

“For me, it was a very-- it was a troubling moment just because I guess you have to come to the realization, to understand that you’re going to have a new normal. You just don’t know what that new normal is.”

Knowing what heart failure is and how it affects your body can help to relieve some of your fears so you can take the steps you need to reduce your symptoms and feel better.

Heart failure is a gradual weakening of the heart that usually develops over a long period of time.

It can be caused by many things, including coronary heart disease, heart valve disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, cigarette smoking, and other factors.

Heart failure does not mean your heart has stopped or is about to stop.

“Heart failure is a condition where the heart itself doesn’t fill or doesn’t pump properly.”

To learn more, let’s take a look at how the heart normally works.

The heart is a muscle that pumps oxygen and nutrient-rich blood through your body to feed your cells so they can perform normal daily activities. On average, your heart beats more than 100,000 times a day.

However, when you have heart failure, your weakened heart can’t pump enough blood to meet your body’s needs.

Over time, as your heart works harder to supply your body with oxygen-rich blood, it begins to change. The walls of your heart become enlarged and thicker and your heart beats faster as it tries to meet your body’s needs. As the heart failure gets worse, these changes aren’t enough and the heart works even harder.

When your heart isn’t pumping blood effectively, the lack of oxygen-rich blood can have effects throughout your body.

You may become tired more easily and notice that you can’t exercise as much.

As the heart loses pumping power, blood backs up in the body’s veins. This usually causes congestion in the body tissues, like swelling or edema in the legs, ankles and abdomen. But it can happen in other parts of the body.

Sometimes fluid collects in the lungs and interferes with breathing, causing shortness of breath.

Heart failure also affects the kidneys’ ability to dispose of sodium and water.

This retained water also increases swelling in the body’s tissues.

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“The most typical symptoms that patients have with congestive heart failure are typically shortness of breath. Sometimes it's just fatigue. Sometimes it's a racing heart. It can be swelling in the legs or abdomen or other signs of volume overload are the more typical things, inability to lie down at night, those types of things.”

Other symptoms of heart failure include: coughing or wheezing, sudden weight gain of 2 or more pounds in a 24-hour period, increased heart rate, nausea, loss of appetite, confusion, and lightheadedness.

Heart failure is a chronic condition, meaning it doesn't go away. Your heart failure treatment plan will focus on relieving your symptoms and supporting the heart's function.

Common treatments include making lifestyle changes, like physical activity and a heart-healthy diet that limits sodium to 1,500 mg or less per day, limiting liquids in your diet, may be required, checking your weight daily, and taking medications that support your heart.

Smoking is also very dangerous for heart failure. If you smoke, it's very important to quit immediately.

By knowing what heart failure is and how it affects your body you can make heart healthy choices each day to reduce your symptoms.

Heart Failure may be scary but you can take steps to keep it in control and feel better.